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著者	HIROSE Tomohisa
journal or publication title	Otsuma Review
volume	53
page range	7-18
year	2020-10-01
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1114/00006889/

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Tomohisa HIROSE

Introduction

In the year 1733, in London, Alexander Pope published the first three Epistles of *An Essay on Man*, which presented in the form of verse the morals derived from the understanding of the relation between the nature and state of human beings and the system of the universe. In the first Epistle of this essay, Pope says:

Say first, of God above or Man below
What can we reason but from what we know?
Of man what see we but his station here,
From which to reason, or to which refer?
Thro' worlds unnumber'd tho' the God be known,
'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.
He who thro' vast immensity can pierce,
See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
Observe how system into system runs,
What other planets circle other suns,
What varied being peoples every star,
May tell why Heav'n has made us as we are:
But of this frame, the bearings and the ties,
The strong connexions, nice dependencies,
Gradations just, has thy pervading soul
Look'd thro'; or can a part contains the whole?
Is the great chain that draws all to agree,
And drawn supports, upheld by God or thee?¹

From these lines, we can understand Pope's idea of the universe as

the one which is composed of innumerable worlds, and is therefore infinite. The universe is one infinite whole, and all in the universe, including man, are linked in “the great chain”. Man, therefore, is one part of the universe, and is placed in a position of the chain of beings.

Then what perception can man have on God and man in the universe? Since a part cannot contain the whole, that is, the infinite universe, we cannot but judge on both God and man in our own system, taking hints from the chain of being in our own world. Pope, therefore, further explains the nature of this chain:

Vast chain of being! which from God began;
 Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
 Beast, bird, fish, insect, who no eye can see,
 No glass can reach; from infinite to thee;
 From thee to nothing. –On superior powers
 Were we to press, inferior might on ours;
 Or in the full creation leave a void,
 Where, one step broken, the great scale’s destroyed:
 From Nature’s chain whatever link you strike,
 Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.²

This great chain reaches from God to what no one can see, i.e., from infinite to man and from man to nothing. If one part of this chain were broken, the chain itself would be broken. Then what morals can we deduce from this perception of the universe of Pope’s? Before considering this question, we must trace the changes in the idea of the chain of being in the history of Western thought.

I The Ideas of the Chain of Being during the Renaissance

The idea of the chain of being during the middle ages was essentially connected with the medieval cosmos of a hierarchically ordered whole from God to the element of earth, which was actually the reflection of the hierarchically ordered medieval social system and value system.

In the medieval cosmos, each position, that is, a status, in the system has its own meaning in the whole system, that is, the reason

of its existence. Each being in this system realizes its essence, a form as its end, in its own position in the system. As for man, each person existed as a part of his status, belonging to a community through which he belonged to the world system, and, therefore, he was not an individual who stands outside a community and the world system.

The medieval cosmos was a qualitatively and ontologically differentiated whole. We can, therefore, understand that it is the penetration into this system, of the quantitative value standard of monetary economy as the more universal value standard brought about from its outside through commercial activities, that caused the dissolution of this cosmos. The commercial activities of the Western, especially Italian merchants were carried out not only between communities but also between world systems, i.e., the Western European, the Byzantine and the Islamic ones.

The dissolution of the medieval cosmos necessarily brought about an image of the universe as a homogeneous, and therefore, infinite expanse of space in which each being exists as a singularly individual thing, and in which man, as an individual, is related to the world through the calculation of profit and loss, which resulted in the development of the double entry system for the balance sheet and that of the mathematics for this system during the 15th and 16th centuries in Italy, and in the forging of the image of the universe as a mathematically calculable one.

During the Renaissance, therefore, the idea of the chain of being could not but undergo changes with the process of the dissolution of the hierarchical order of the world system. The development of the geometrical method of perspective in paintings from Giotto to Da Vinci was exactly the reflection of this process. Giotto was under the influence of St. Francis who denied the hierarchical order among all that exist under God.

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), under the influence of Hermetism, presented the Neo-Platonic world picture in which there are five gradations, from the Deity (the One), followed by angel, anima, quality, and quantity (the matter). It looks as if in Ficino, the emphasis of the hierarchical order had got stronger. In this formula, however, Ficino

positions man in the middle of the order as the mediator, and gives him the power to know and understand everything in the world for him to go beyond gradations to be one with God.

Under the influence of Hermetism also, Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) proposed the view of the universe, composed of three worlds, i.e., those of the elements, the stars and the Intelligence, which exist through the power of the world spirit. He places man in the center of these three worlds as a microcosm which reflects the universe as a macrocosm, and, therefore, can find the occult power in the universe through magic for the utility of man.

In both Ficino's and Agrippa's systems of the world, the hierarchical order survived, undergoing a great change in it, which reflected the emergence of man as an individual with the attitude of trying to understand the whole world for the benefit of man. They, therefore, placed man in the center of the universe with the power of understanding everything in the world. To them, however, the method of understanding nature and the world could not but be the one based on the Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian idea of form and matter. To them, forces in the natural world are of spiritual nature, and should be controlled through influencing spirits in nature using symbols.

II The Chain of Being after the Renaissance

The commercial activities of the Western and Italian merchants during the middle ages and the Renaissance brought about the mental attitude of man as an individual of seeing the world from its outside and understanding it quantitatively, as a homogeneous and, therefore, infinite expanse of space. In the commercial activities at this stage, however, the image of the flow of time was not as homogenized or equalized as that in the stage of the prevalence of industrial activities, as the commercial activities in this stage depended largely on the conditions of nature, that is, under the effect of spiritual forces in nature, and what happens in the flow of time was, therefore, unpredictable and uncontrollable. In this stage, therefore, the attitude of seeing the flow of time from its outside as homogeneous and equable had not yet developed, which caused, as we have seen and will see, the idea of

the chain of being to remain in various forms under the influence of Hermetic Neo-Platonism.

During the latter half of the 16th century, with the development of mathematics, especially the introduction of plus, minus and equal signs, and under the influence of the emergence of the Copernican system, the image of the world and man's position in it underwent a significant change, and there appeared a completely new attitude toward nature and the world. Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), who started his career as an astrologist, thought of the essence of the power of the sun which moves planets as a spiritual one, and called it *anima motrix*. By applying his master's mathematical data into the Copernican system, however, he discovered three laws on the revolution of a planet around the sun, and expressed these laws as simple mathematical formulas, calling them natural laws. This method of Kepler's of explaining the phenomena in the world through mathematical relations and not through the spiritual essences, i.e., forms, of things as their causes would necessarily dissolve the chain of being based on the hierarchical order of essences, and lead to the method of Descartes, Galileo, and Newton.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), an Italian Dominican monk, while deeply examining the nature of the infinite universe as in the Copernican system celestial orbs lost the reason of their existence, considered the existing mathematics as of no use, as under the existence of infinite number or infinite extension, there cannot be any order or difference. Bruno, therefore, depended on the metaphysical thinking on the idea of oneness, and in the book titled *On the Infinite, the Universe and the Worlds*, said:

. . . all is one: the heavens, the immensity of space, its womb, the containing universe, the ethereal regions through which all things travel as they move. Therein are innumerable stars, more stars, globes, suns and earths perceptible to the sight, apparent to reason and inference. The immense universe is infinite and is composed of this space and compounded of these bodies.³

The infinite universe contains in it innumerable worlds like our solar system, and it is one, which means that this universe has no center or circumference, and therefore, no outside. Then all that happens in this universe has its direct internal cause and principle. This principle which remains in its effect, he called the soul of the universe which is its internal force. Nothing can transcend this universe, and therefore, no one can explain this universe from its outside.

Bruno, however, goes further to introduce the idea of monad as the ultimate unit of the universe, thinking that monads constitute the whole universe in harmony, while expressing it in each. Each monad, therefore, is infinite in itself, in its oneness, as it is one. It is a part of the whole universe, and the whole universe is in a part. We must rather say that under infinity the distinction between a part and a whole loses its meaning.

All things are in the universe, and the universe is in all things: we in it, and it in us; in this way everything concurs in a perfect unity.⁴

In this universe, there is no room for any order or chain to exist, and all are equal, and all are in one.

III The Chain of Being and Morals in the Age of Pope

Leibnitz (1646-1716), also thinking deeply upon the problem of infinity and oneness metaphysically and mathematically, succeeded to Bruno's idea of monad, and thought that the whole universe consists of its units, monads, which he called force-atoms, whose attribute he considered force. By this force, each monad can express the whole universe though the universe is infinite. Concerning why an infinitesimally small monad can express the infinite universe, Leibnitz thought that a monad, though infinitesimal, is infinite in itself, and its force is infinite. To this problem, Leibnitz seems to have applied a system of differential calculus of his own construction in which infinitesimally small point can express the entire line or diagram. Since a monad is one and indivisible, it can express and contain within itself the entire

universe though it is infinite, as it is one, and since it has no window open to its outside, all that happens in a monad is contained in it from the beginning.

When he considered how monads compose the infinite universe in perfect harmony, however, Leibnitz could not help depending on the idea of a hierarchical order, thinking that monads are ordered according to the clarity of their expression, i.e., according to the quality of their intelligence. God, the Creator, the clearest monad, Leibnitz thought, created monads so that they work together in harmony. What happens in one monad does not affect another monad directly. It, however, is expressed in all other monads, and the whole universe changes like an organism in perfect harmony.

From Leibnitz's system comes what Pope calls "Vast chain of being", in which an individual as man should:

Cease, then, nor Order imperfection name;
 Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
 Know thy own point: this kind, this due degree
 Of blindness, weakness, Heav'n bestows on thee.
 Submit: in this or any other sphere,
 Secure to be as bless'd as thou canst bear;
 Safe in the hand of one disposing Power,
 Or in the natal or the mortal hour.
 All Nature is but Art unknown to thee;
 All chance direction, which thou canst not see;
 All discord, harmony not understood;
 All partial evil, universal good:
 And spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
 One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.⁵

All that man as an individual should do is to know his position as man in the great chain of being, and never to go beyond it.

During the eighteenth century after Pope, the Newtonian world view prevailed with the progress of the Industrial Revolution. In this world view, man seemed to be able to explain all that happens in the

whole universe through mathematical relations, based on Newton's definitions of absolute time and space. According to these definitions, absolute time is the time which flows equably from the infinite past to the infinite future, and absolute space is the space which is an infinite, homogeneous expanse. Since, however, no one can have the absolute measure to tell they are absolute as far as one is inside this infinite universe, for these definitions to be accepted, there must have been a change in man's attitude towards the world and the whole universe. In this world view, man, as an individual, faces the whole world as if he stood outside it, though it be infinite, and sees it as the object, through which attitude man as an individual becomes the subject.

With the prevalence of the Newtonian world view, therefore, during the latter half of the 18th century, the idea of the chain of being based on the hierarchical order of the world, suddenly disappeared, with which man's attitude towards nature and the world changed completely. In the age of the industrial revolution, with this attitude, man confronted nature, and saw it as a means of making profit, which brought nature into devastation, and people into perpetual conflicts of interests.

It is this situation that caused the spirit of romanticism to emerge, in which man as an individual presented in various fields of human activities the ideas based on the aesthetic attitude towards nature and the whole universe. Then what is the nature of this attitude?

Conclusion

In the year 1848, in New York, Edgar Allan Poe read and published a prose poem titled *Eureka*, and the next year he died.

On the purport of *Eureka*, Poe said:

I design to speak of the *Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical —of the material and Spiritual Universe: —of its essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny*. I shall be so rash, moreover, as to challenge the conclusions, and thus, in effect, to question the sagacity, of many of the greatest and most justly revered of men.⁶

What Poe intended to propose in this poem was the idea of the universe in which the physical, material and the metaphysical, spiritual elements are mathematically united in one in its individuality and infinity. And Poe was rash to do so, as he thought his idea should challenge and question the established ideas of the greatest of men.

In the age of Poe, what was considered as the most firmly established idea of the universe was that based on the Newtonian physics which had been developed by the application of differential equations during the 18th century. Based on this development, in 1814, French physicist, mathematician and astronomer, Pierre-Simon de Laplace presented his causally deterministic world view in which with the knowledge of the Newtonian physics one can tell whatever occurrence in the universe in the future and in the past, if one knows the present state of the infinite universe in every aspect and point.

In the age of Poe, however, the paradox of infinity resulted from Newton's definitions of absolute time and space had already become apparent in the field of mathematics, and astronomy, with the emergence of non-Euclidean geometry, the discovery of extra-solar systems and galaxies, etc.

Like Bruno, and Leibnitz, therefore, Poe started his exploration with the metaphysical thinking upon infinity and oneness, and announces what he calls 'the ruling idea':

My general proposition, then, is this: —*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation.*⁷

Poe considers the original state of the universe as the unity, i.e., one. If, however, this unity be infinite, then:

There was an epoch in the Night of Time, when a still-existent Being existed—one of an absolutely infinite number of similar Beings that people the absolutely infinite domains of the absolutely infinite space.⁸

Here, like Bruno and Leibnitz, Poe considers our universe, that is, “a still-existent Being” as a monad which itself is infinite. Therefore, the infinite universe, that is, “the absolutely infinite domains of the absolutely infinite space”, is composed of an absolutely infinite number of monads. Then:

It was not and is not in the power of this Being — any more than it is in your own — to extend by actual increase, the joy of his Existence; but just as it is in your power to expand or concentrate your pleasures (the absolute amount of happiness remaining always the same) so did and does a similar capability appertain to this Divine Being, who thus passes his Eternity in perpetual variation of Concentrated Self and almost Infinite Self-Diffusion. What you call The Universe is but his present expansive existence.⁹

Here Poe considers the essence of a monad of “this Divine Being” as the existence in itself, and the essence of the existence in itself he considers as happiness, the joy of being in itself. And he sees the infinity of this monad in the eternity of its force of expression. This monad, therefore, with its eternal force, expresses itself as the infinite diffusion and concentration of the same total amount of happiness in “an infinity of imperfect pleasures”¹⁰ of innumerable monads of lesser degrees he calls creatures from animals to lifeless matter. And then:

These creatures are all, too, more or less conscious Intelligence; conscious, first, of a proper identity; conscious, secondly and by faint indeterminate glimpses, of an identity with the Divine Being of whom we speak — of an identity with God. Of the two classes of consciousness, fancy that the former will grow weaker, the latter stronger, during the long succession of ages which must elapse before these myriads of individual Intelligences become blended — when the bright stars become blended — into one.¹¹

It looks as if in Poe’s system, monads were ordered according to the

degrees of intelligence, like in Leibnitz's. Poe, however, considers these degrees as those of the amount of happiness, and thus makes the difference, the order, to expire in eternity, the infinity of time. In the Universe of the monad of the Divine Being, therefore, each individual monad, however imperfect, as an individual, expresses, by its force of eternity derived from the Divine Being, the happiness of its own existence of just existing unaffected by anything from its outside as its growing consciousness of identity with the Divine Being. And as the universe of this Divine Being is "one of an absolutely infinite number of similar Beings that people the absolutely infinite domains of the absolutely infinite space", we can say, by analogy, that a monad of each of us, if it is conscious of the pleasure of being just existing, can express this pleasure individually according to its own tendency towards the unity with the absolutely infinite universe.

In this system of the universe of Poe's, like in Newton's system, man, as an individual, faces the world, as the infinite universe. Still, with the attitude of seeing it as one, though infinite, through seeing every being in it as being, one can overcome whatever distinction or opposition in the world to be one with the universe, and thus realize "All things are in the universe, and the universe is in all things: we in it, and it in us; in this way everything concurs in a perfect unity."

Notes

- 1 Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Man*, (London, 1733) (Quoted from Wikisource): Epistle I-I.
- 2 Ibid., Epistle I-VIII.
- 3 Bruno, Giordano. *On the Infinity, the Universe, and the Worlds*, Eng. tra. by Scott Gosnell, (U. S. A., 2014): p. 99.
- 4 Bruno, Giordano. From *Cause, Principle, and Unity* (1584), Giordano Bruno(Wikiquote): p. 5.
- 5 Pope, Alexander. Op. cit., Epistle I-X.
- 6 Poe, Edgar A. *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, BiblioLife: p. 7.
- 7 Ibid., p. 8.
- 8 Poe, Edgar A. *Eureka*, op. cit.: p. 142.

9 Ibid., p. 142.

10 Ibid., p. 142.

11 Ibid., p. 143.